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DR. AMBEDKAR AND UNTOUCHABILITY

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Abstract: Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) was an Indian jurist, economist, politician and social reformer. He was a social revolutionary in many ways. Born into the 'Mahar' community, which was considered an 'untouchable' caste, as a child Dr Ambedkar had a first hand experience of the caste system in India and the discrimination meted out to the untouchables. Having gone through the dehumanizing experience of being ostracized by society by virtue of his 'caste', he made a firm resolve to radically alter the state of affairs.

He criticized the caste system as unjust and the practice of untouchability as inhuman. He sought to awaken and organize the untouchables into a potent social and political force. He criticized the Hindu scriptures for their bias against the lower castes. He advocated the abolition of the caste system in his famous work *The Annihilation of Caste*. As the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, Dr Ambedkar also made sure that the practice of untouchability was banned.

Dr Ambedkar has left an indelible mark on the Indian society. His untiring efforts for the upliftment of the untouchables shall be remembered for generations to come. It was largely due to his zeal that the untouchables have got legal and constitutional guarantees to live with dignity and equality.

Keywords :- caste, untouchables, society, Constitution, equality

Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) was an Indian jurist, economist, politician and social reformer. He was a social revolutionary in many ways. He rose to become the leader of the backward classes in India and later on served as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution and the Law Minister of India. Towards the later part of his life he embraced Buddhism, inspired by its emphasis on social equality. In 1990, the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian award, was posthumously conferred upon Ambedkar.

Born into the 'Mahar' community, which was considered an 'untouchable' caste, as a child Dr Ambedkar had a first hand experience of the caste system in India and the discrimination meted out to the untouchables (also known as the 'dalits', 'depressed classes' or 'scheduled castes'). They were at the bottom of the social hierarchy as imposed by the caste system. Although they performed vital functions in society related to sanitation and disposal of human waste, their work was considered as 'impure' and 'polluting'. They were denied access to public wells and temples as well as opportunities for higher education and employment. They were looked down upon by members of the upper castes who considered them inferior. They were not allowed to partake in social functions with members of the other castes. Even their touch was considered polluting for which elaborate purification ceremonies were laid down. They had no option but to endure this humiliation. Their condition was no better than slaves under the feudal system.

Although they attended school, Ambedkar and other untouchable children were segregated and given little attention or help by teachers. They were not allowed to sit inside the class. When they needed to drink water, someone from a higher caste had to pour that water from a height as they were not allowed to touch either the water or the vessel that contained it. This task was usually performed for the young Ambedkar by the school peon, and if the peon was not available then he had to go without water; he described the situation later in his writings as "No peon, No Water". He was required to sit on a gunny sack which he had to take home with him.

Dr Ambedkar decided that he will not accept this as his destiny. Having gone through the dehumanizing experience of being ostracized by society by virtue of his 'caste', he made a firm resolve to radically alter the state of affairs. By dint of sheer hard work he applied all his energies to gain access to higher education. He knew education was the first step in unlocking human potential. In this regard, he was inspired by Jyotiba Phule, another social reformer who saw education as linked to development. Dr Ambedkar went abroad to get higher education with the generous support of a benefactor. He studied at the Columbia University in USA and the London School of Economics and earned his doctorate degrees. He also observed the free society of the West which was not bound by the caste restrictions. After completing his education, he came back to India, determined to be an agent of change.

Initially, Dr Ambedkar started teaching in a University. He found that inspite of his academic credentials, he was still subject to discrimination from others in the workplace as well as society due to his 'caste.' He decided to fight this discrimination albeit not by the sword but by his pen. He started publishing newspapers like 'Mook Nayak', 'Bahishkrit Bharat' and 'Janata' wherein he expressed his views on an egalitarian society. He criticized the caste system as unjust and the practice of untouchability as inhuman. He also began to address members of the untouchable caste and urged them to shed their inferiority complex, challenge irrational beliefs and customs and assert their rights.

Slowly, but surely, Dr Ambedkar started emerging as the leader of the untouchables in India. Members of his community looked upon him as their savior. He founded a number of organizations to mobilize the Indian Dalits like 'Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha', 'Independent Labour Party' and 'All India Scheduled Castes Federation'. Leaders of the freedom struggle in India sought to engage with him in garnering the support of his community in opposing the British rule in India. The British government too invited him to attend the Round Table Conference on the issue of reforms in India.

In 1932 when the British government announced separate electorates for the Depressed Classes in India, Dr Ambedkar supported this move as he believed it would lead to the political empowerment of the Dalits. However, Gandhiji opposed it as he feared it would create a division in the Hindu society. Upon Gandhiji's request, Dr Ambedkar agreed for reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes within the Hindu community instead of separate electorates. This arrangement came to be known as the Poona Pact. It shows that Dr Ambedkar, while remaining steadfast in his quest for upliftment of the Dalits, had the statesmanship to accommodate the views of other major leaders of the time in the interest of national unity.

Dr Ambedkar recognized that centuries of discrimination against the untouchables had sapped their vital energies. Hence, he sought to awaken and organize the untouchables into a potent social and political force. He led movements for allowing entry of untouchables into temples like the famous Kalaram Temple Movement in Nashik in 1937. He criticized the Hindu scriptures for their bias against the lower castes. He publicly condemned the classic Hindu text, 'Manusmriti' (Laws of Manu), for ideologically justifying caste discrimination and "untouchability", and he ceremonially burned copies of the ancient text. He also sought to downplay the various rituals and traditions in the Hindu religion which were openly discriminating against the untouchables.

Dr Ambedkar realized that untouchability was the direct product of the caste system in India. He believed that the caste system was the root cause of social injustice. It led to social stagnation and prevented social mobility. He saw the caste system as an unequal mode of organization of social relations, with the pure and the impure at either extreme. Hence, he advocated the abolition of the caste system in his famous work *The Annihilation of Caste*. He also encouraged inter-caste marriages and inter-dining amongst members of different castes so as to break the barriers imposed by the caste system on social intercourse.

Dr Ambedkar encouraged the untouchables to come forward and educate themselves. He urged them to take up professional and administrative jobs in urban areas. He believed that the twin pillars of education and economic empowerment would contribute to raising the social status of the untouchables. It would instil in them the required confidence to break the chains of the caste system and live a life of dignity, equality and opportunity. By the time of independence, Dr Ambedkar had firmly established himself as the tallest leader of the Dalit community in India and was their chief spokesperson on social, economic and political issues.

In many ways, the movement led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar for the rights of the untouchables in India resembled the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. in USA in the 1960's and the anti-apartheid movement led by Nelson Mandela in South Africa in the 1990's. He was, thus, the harbinger of social transformation in India.

Dr Ambedkar realized that the untouchables would also need support from the government in their struggle for emancipation. Hence, he sought reservation for the untouchables in legislature, government jobs and educational institutions. He firmly believed this would give them the necessary push to prosper in life. He also sought access to legal channels for Dalits to secure their rights. It was largely due to his efforts that the Constitution of independent India recognized the provision of reservation in public services, legislatures and educational institutions for the socially and educationally backward classes (Article 15 and 335).

As the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, Dr Ambedkar also made sure that the practice of untouchability was banned (Article 17). The Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 makes the practice of untouchability punishable by law.

Dr Ambedkar has left an indelible mark on the Indian society. His untiring efforts for the upliftment of the untouchables shall be remembered for generations to come. It was largely due to his zeal that the untouchables have got legal and constitutional guarantees to live with dignity and equality.

